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Trending Now: #Competitions



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How has the rising popularity of competitions affected the concert dance world?

Backstage at Youth America Grand Prix finals. Photo by Kyle Froman.

Showstopper hosts more than 50 events each year. Photo courtesy Showstopper.

A disembodied voice calls out a number, name, age and title of the dance. Out of the wings comes an expert strut of lanky limbs and big pointe-shoed feet as an adolescent dancer begins her solo. Maybe it's Kitri's sassy Act III variation or perhaps some hypermobile contemporary choreography to the latest pop ballad. Either way, the stakes for this young dancer are incredibly high: Sitting in the audience alongside nervous parents, tense teachers and a table of judges are the artistic directors of major dance companies, who've come to scout for fresh talent.

While competitions are certainly not new to the dance world, they are now taken more seriously than ever as part of a dancer's training. It is no longer possible for traditional dance schools to turn their noses up at competitions where top ballet and modern companies routinely hand out scholarships and contracts—Youth America Grand Prix, for one, estimates that over 300 of its alumni are now dancing in 80 companies around the world. More dancers from competitions/conventions such as New York City Dance Alliance and JUMP are now finding professional homes in companies such as Batsheva Dance Company, Dresden Semperoper Ballett, Aszure Barton & Artists and Boston Ballet. Not only are competitions now a place for dancers to be seen early in their pre-professional career, these contests are also giving concert-dance companies that special something: bold dancers who can do it all.

YAGP boasts more than 300 alumni dancing for 80 companies worldwide. Photo by Rachel Papo for Pointe.

"These dancers have an indomitable will and a sense to just get out there," says Ballet West artistic director Adam Sklute, who routinely scouts for dancers at The Music Center's Spotlight Awards, YAGP, World Ballet Competition and USA IBC in Jackson. About a quarter of his company members have come through competition-dance channels. "I look for young students who are fearless and I follow their progression over a number of years."

Coached from a young age to perform virtuosic tricks and pushed to command a stag competition dancers tend to exhibit a precocious confidence that sets them apart from

students who develop in the more traditional dance school format of humbly honing technique before performing regularly. "I think a lot of competition dancers come into companies day one with verve and fire," says Desmond Richardson, co-artistic director of Complexions Contemporary Ballet, which launched the new Élite Dance Tournament this year in conjunction with the Joffrey Ballet School in New York City. Even though former competitors' stage presence can sometimes look exaggerated, Richardson says it's typically easier for artistic staff to tone down dancers' performance quality rather than turn it up later.

But how does all of this spirited willfulness work out when it moves into the more understated world of a corps de ballet or ensemble? Many young dancers experience a learning curve when they have to adjust to working in groups and learning to match their peers instead of stealing the show in just one solo. There can sometimes be a culture clash between competition dancers and their non-competition peers. After competing at events like Showbiz National Talent and LA Dance Magic, Ida Saki remembers feeling somewhat looked down upon as a "trickster with no artistry" when she first transferred to a performing arts high school where competitions weren't the norm. However, when she later joined Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet, though she sometimes wished she had more training in strict ballet, she often felt she had an advantage with choreographers who saw her as more adventurous about taking on foreign movement vocabularies.

Competitions also seem to promote an exceptional kind of resiliency. Being constantly coached for competitions creates dancers who absorb constructive criticism easily—and the judging process teaches them early on how subjective dance is as an art form. As Saki learned at a young age, "One person may fall in love with you while the person sitting next to them couldn't care less."

Dusty Button credits her work ethic today to her time on the circuit. Photo courtesy Button.

Dusty Button, a Boston Ballet principal who cut her teeth at NYCDA and Showstopper, believes her competitive sensibility helped her rise to the top of the ballet company hierarchy unusually fast. "It fostered a work ethic in the sense that I believe if you're going to rehearse, it should be at your best 100 percent of the time," she says. "Otherwise, you slow yourself from progressing." Button is only one example at Boston Ballet: Fellow young principals like Whitney Jensen and Jeffrey Cirio also racked up multiple titles before rising through the company's ranks. It's an unsurprising trend in a company where the rep thrives on thrilling virtuosity.

The pitfalls of focusing so much attention on performing a variation for a contest, especially for a less experienced student, tend to show up in the details of proper technique. Either because of a rush to do advanced steps too soon or out of a desire to absorb so many different styles so quickly, the fine-tuning can be overlooked. Teaching ballet for Velocity Dance Convention and Competition, Melissa Sandvig, who danced for Milwaukee Ballet and on “So You Think You Can Dance,” often sees amazing movers whipping off eight pirouettes, yet finds herself focusing on basic technical aspects of a step or transitions between positions. Richardson agrees: “They may have no problem with performing, but it’s the transitions, passing through fifth, that sometimes is left out.”

Ida Saki became more adventurous at competitions like LA Dance Magic. Photo courtesy Saki.

Richardson’s new competition brainchild, Élite Dance Tournament, tries to meld the best of both worlds by giving young dancers an opportunity to be seen—and to focus on technical details and artistry. In a fashion similar to the Prix de Lausanne, EDT requires contestants to take scored master classes that are limited to just 25 students.

It’s no surprise that aspiring professionals are attracted to the unparalleled exposure offered at competitions. “You have to go for it to get noticed now and take risks to get better,” says Sandvig. Competitions train young dancers to do just that. But as more and more come through this route, the trick will be converting so many standout dancers into members of an aesthetically coherent ensemble, rather than a band of solo artists sparring for the spotlight.

A former dancer, Candice Thompson is a frequent contributor to *Dance Magazine*.

BOSTON BALLET DESMOND RICHARDSON DUSTY BUTTON JEFFREY CIRIO
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